

Charter Schools: Educational Reform or Failed Initiative?

By William C. Knaak and Jean T. Knaak

The authors discuss charter schools for their 20-plus years of existence. They include the historic phenomena that have resulted in the unusual development of charter schools due to political pressures, social events, and the media. Explanation of operations and growth of charter schools includes a discussion of high-success charter schools, the Minnesota experience as the first state with a charter-school law, and the national charter-school scene, which includes evaluative criteria of accountability, efficiency, competition, innovation, choice, and autonomy.

As charter schools evolved following vouchers and magnet schools as concepts of choice for America's parents, City Academy in St. Paul, Minnesota, became the birthplace of charter schools in the United States in 1991. Minnesota also passed the first charter-school law, still ranked as the number one such law in the nation by the National Alliance for Public Charter Schools (NAPCS, 2013). State Senator Ember Reichgott, then assistant majority leader of the Minnesota Senate and the principal author of the bill, spoke eloquently about charters on the senate floor in 1991, stating that charter schools were born of a vision that parents and teachers would create a new and different school to better meet the needs of students (Junge, 2012). Since that time, Reichgott has continued to promote charter schools as a speaker and writer.

A little more than 20 years later, in 2013, more than 5,600 charter schools exist in 39 states. Estimates of attendance range from as many as 2 million students in attendance (Junge, 2012) to 1.3 million students (NAPCS, 2013). These charters are publicly financed and tuition-free but operate independently from traditional school district governance. Because they operate under individual state laws, no national definition fits all charter schools. In most states, tuition is not allowed, but parents can be assigned fund-raising responsibilities. In about two decades, the charter school concept has gone from being the poster child for school reform to becoming a part of the establishment, with state and national associations well-staffed with lobbyists and public relations personnel and enormous support from mainstream media, politicians, and well-heeled foundations.

Qualitative and quantitative research data about charter schools are limited. Many headlines include spectacular claims about fantastic gains made by students in charter schools; however, these headlines usually apply to a very small number of schools and limited periods of time. Further, so many changes occur in these schools due to closings and management shifts that little longitudinal data exist. Simon (2013) noted that because charters exist outside of nearly all governmental, religious, ethical, or academic authority, unbiased qualitative evaluation of their operations is almost nonexistent.

Some former think tanks for school reform have become outspoken advocates for charter schools. The Obama administration, through Education Secretary Duncan, placed

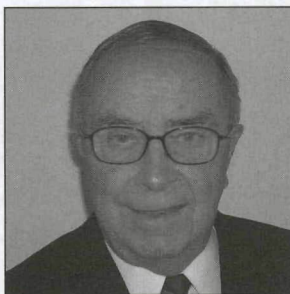
successful charters in a key posture in education reform. For example, in the administration's *Race to the Top* state-competitive program to share in \$4.35 billion, states lost points if they did not have a permissive law for charters.

Historic Phenomena in the Unusual Development of Charter Schools

Before 1980, the issue of school choice *a la* vouchers and charters was viewed negatively by the mainstream media and most elected politicians as a mechanism to allow White students and their parents to escape school desegregation (Ravitch, 2010). What then has changed? Several historic phenomena began to converge in the 1980s, and that convergence continues and intensifies in 2013. These include

1. The disillusionment of liberal state and national legislators and federal judges with public education's ability or inclination to solve the perceived education-equity issues, especially as related to poverty and race;
2. A thoroughly mainstream-mediated and publicized impression that the United States is falling behind in the world economy, that its national economy is disintegrating, and that both declines are the result of failure of the American public schools;
3. The departure of a significant number of the nation's major philanthropic organizations from *open* giving to the humanities (including education) to more focused giving with expectation of results;
4. The *opportunity factor* in charter schools given to all parents, especially those of the academically talented students, for choice and control of the nature and composition of the schools their children attend; and
5. The adulatory media publicity given a limited number of high success charter schools, especially those serving poor and minority-race children, without much regard for the basic reasons for that success or its continuing impact. (Knaak, 2013, p. 199)

Phenomenon 1: Disillusionment. In the first phenomenon, the historic, traditional, and unconditional support of the national Democratic Party's political forces for public education and its support of teacher unions began to erode. Members of Congress, who initially passed President Johnson's Elementary and Secondary Act of 1965 for the benefit



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of minority races and poor children, became increasingly frustrated with public schools. Most of this frustration related to the perceived and widely publicized seeming inability of the public schools to meet the politicians' expectations of equity in academic education, especially for non-Asian minorities and the poor. Today, this thrust for equity has morphed into demanding the same test score levels for all races on standardized tests of academic achievement. The current disparity on standardized tests is referred to as the *learning gap*.

As it became apparent that massive busing and forced desegregation were not going to solve the problem of the racial gap in learning, school district personnel created magnet schools where White, minority, and poor students could choose to attend together. Next, minority and poor students were allowed to choose any school within the school district. Then, they were allowed to choose places in schools in suburban school districts.

The initial ESEA of 1965 and subsequent reauthorizations of that act up through the last reauthorization, known as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), had impressive bipartisan support in Congress. Yet nothing much has changed in the learning gap between White and non-Asian minority students since 1988, and the failures are largely attributed to ineptness in the public schools.

Phenomenon 2: Perception of falling behind internationally. Nearly concurrently there arose the second phenomenon of a well-publicized impression that the United States was falling behind in the world economy and that this was the result of the failure of public schools. This impression started in the 1970s and was exemplified by a 1975 *New York Times* front-page report that scores on the SAT, the nation's premier college entrance examination, had fallen steadily for more than a decade (Ravitch, 2010).

The tumultuous 1960s and 1970s in education in the United States culminated in the explosive publication of *A Nation at Risk* (1983), a report prepared by the National Commission on Excellence in Education appointed by Terrell Bell, President Reagan's Secretary of Education. Diane Ravitch (2010), a career education reformist, provided an analysis of the preceding events and of the content and aspirations of that report. She contended that in addition to identifying the perceived issues of the quality and content of learning of American students, the report was, in part, a political response to the radical reform movements of the late 1960s and early 1970s. "No one who lived in the time will forget the proliferation of experiments and movements in the nation's schools" (Ravitch, 2010, p. 23).

Phenomenon 3: Departure of philanthropic organizations. A third phenomenon helping charter development has been the departure of a significant number of the nation's major philanthropic organizations from open giving for the benefit of the humanities to more focused giving with the expectation of results. In the old mode of foundation giving, the Andrew Carnegie Foundation established more than 2500 free libraries in the United States and elsewhere, but no one even considered any need to calculate the results of those gifts. In contrast, Bill Gates (and the world's largest endowed foundation that bears his name) recited "American high schools are obsolete" (2005) repeatedly to large worldwide audiences, and the media—and Americans—paid attention. Gates defined as obsolete all high schools that are not small and do not lead students directly to college. Thus, although the Gates Foundation is dedicated to improving people's lives by sharing advances in health and learning with the global community, applications of benefits get tied up with active advocacy of capitalistic philosophy and educational practice—an expectation that specific results must be realized for education to be considered "successful."

Phenomenon 4: Opportunity factor. The fourth phenomenon of the charter school explosion epitomizes another, but different, opportunity factor for charter schools. It is the seizure of the charter school momentum by parents of students of all races, all sexual orientations, and all ethnic groups who are in the upper one-third of students academically.

Many private and parochial schools, as well as public schools, are closing because of losing school-choice enrollments to state-funded charter schools. Rather than charter schools representing a *rising up* of non-Asian minority and other poor students and parents, evidence shows that the more academically inclined students and progressively minded parents from poorly operated public and closed private schools are doing most of the rising up to take the presumed advantages of charters. They are leaving behind an underclass of dropouts from public schools, students from poor families and non-Asian minorities, and a much larger body of the forgotten half as identified and discussed extensively in *A Nation at Risk* (NCEE, 1983).

State charter laws do not require new charter students to be chosen from poor or minority families. Most charter laws do not permit the school to refuse admission based on race or academic achievement, but they do allow an admissions process and they do not control reasons for dismissal. Parents of the upper academic elite seized on this opportunity to enhance school experiences for their children, although the innovative promoters of charter schools had intended that the learning of the lower half of students would be enhanced through those schools (Simon, 2013).

Phenomenon 5: Media focus. The fifth phenomenon impacting public attitude toward charter schools involves the oft-repeated statements in the media, including those of well-known columnists and writers of newspaper editorials, that charter schools have proven effective in improving academic test scores of minority and poor children in elementary and secondary schools and in erasing the Black-achievement color gap on state and national academic achievement tests. These statements add credence to a public concept that all charter schools are good and effective and, conversely, to the concept that public schools are ineffective and biased because they cannot seem to accomplish those objectives. There is also an implied concept that—if they wanted to—public school leaders could adopt the “new” wisdom of the charters with equal success. In fact, an initial claim in the development of charters was that they would become *islands of excellence* to be copied by the public schools.

Operations and Growth

Charter schools vary so greatly across and within the United States that it is nearly impossible to categorize them in any way. Yet news articles and editorials often begin with “Charter schools are” (with some definitive description). This is similar to starting with “Oceans are,” without having any valid ending except “usually wet.” In general, however, charter schools are largely excused from requirements for teacher unions or state-curriculum guidelines. Nearly all of the successful charters have benefited from start-up and continuing federal grants or foundation grants apart from state or local taxpayer funding.

High-success charter schools. Charter schools are allowed to use different procedures, methods, and instructional hours than the standard public school that is constrained by state board of education standards, the state legislature, and union contracts. Charter schools are usually defined as public schools because, as chartered by the state, they receive state public-education money. However, most have little or no relationship with local,

county, or regional educational governing bodies, flying in the face of historical national commitment for local control of education.

In the federal and state concept of charters, *open enrollment* is intended. Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) scanned the public schools of the country for pockets of superb education before authoring their book, *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning*. Six out of ten of the federally identified poor school children in the country are also Black or Hispanic. Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) sought out remarkable public schools that included charter schools, but they excluded private schools from this study because “90% of American children attend public schools” (p. 44). As it turned out, all of the remarkable schools they described in their book were charter schools. In part, because of the Thernstroms’ impeccable reputation and research and writing skills, a great deal of public attention has focused on this characterization. A frequent public interpretation has been that charter schools have proven that poor, minority-race children can succeed in school and become college qualified. Public and other schools should take note and do likewise (Thernstrom, 2003).

However, almost all high-achievement charter schools have an admissions process that tends to discourage families who are unlikely to engage fully with the school in the education of their child. Thernstrom and Thernstrom (2003) described what they identified as a common scenario: Parents are first invited to an open house, where they are given a very negative sell concerning required school uniforms, 2 hours of homework with parental checking each night, no summer vacation in July, and school on weekdays from 7:25 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. daily plus Saturday mornings—and are told that if they do not agree with these requirements and parameters, “then this school may not be for you” (Thernstrom & Thernstrom, 2003, p. 47). Parents who still find the school appealing can come back on a Saturday to sit through a simulated school day and pick up an application.

Most of the private, corporate, or publicly funded charter schools do not publish either per pupil costs or dropout rates. However, in schools offering Grades 5 to 8, scores on mandated state tests tend to peak at the 8th grade level. Typically 60% of the students in the charter schools who sign on in Grade 5 are no longer present at the Grade 8 testing (Henig, 2010, as cited in Ravitch, 2010). In summary, experience indicates that students in these successful schools have been “admitted” and “retained” through a CPLD process (cherry picking-lemon dropping).

The Minnesota experience. In 2009, nearly 20 years after the first startup, the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* issued an editorial clarion call headlined “Reform is Overdue for Charter Schools.” Later that year, the *Star-Tribune* continued with analysis: “Some have been successful, some have struggled, and some have crashed and burned” (Kennedy, 2009, p. A17). Studies, research, and news investigations have made similar points. Monitoring

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provided by sponsors and the state is unclear and often complicated.

As charter controversy continued, Coleman (2009), an editorial columnist for the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, wrote, "Charters, as a Cure, Feel like a Disease." "The charter school crusade has grown too large and too expensive to dismiss. It is eating severely into limited funding and has blurred the lines between church and state" (Coleman, 2009, p. A17). Coleman also said that "charter schools have created a huge tax-supported playpen where entrepreneurial start-up schools have been loosely supervised and unscrutinized by education officials who are accountable to the approval or rejection of taxpayers" (2009, p. A17). He called the charter school movement a sacred cow that is now a part of the nation's educational problem and not a solution.

Meanwhile, the learning gap in Minnesota between poor-minority students and White students, one of the worst in the nation, has not budged in 20 years. To our knowledge, there is also no comprehensive weight of evidence showing that Minnesota students are better off than they were 20 years ago.

The national charter school scene. A vast difference exists among states as to numbers of schools, state organization, and finance of charter schools. In 2010, California had 809 charter schools and Arizona 482, but 11 states had no charter-school-permissive legislation. We reviewed evidence from a number of states—a difficult process as there is no national evaluative database because charter schools are largely exempt from the reporting requirements of public schools.

Ravitch, a research professor at New York University and senior fellow at the Brookings Institution, served as Assistant Secretary of Education for the United States from 1991 to 1993. In 2010, she authored *The Death and Life of the American School System—How Testing and Choice are Undermining Education*. In a 35-page chapter on school choice and charter schools, Ravitch discussed the evidence that caused her to reverse her decades-long support for choice and charters.

Former U.S. President G. W. Bush endorsed and promoted charter schools while he was governor of Texas. After his departure from that office, reports of abuse of the state law began to filter back to the state legislature. It became clear that the Texas State Education Agency did not have sufficient authority to deal with the problems being identified by the public press. A Texas State Legislature committee chair commented, "I think that the expansion of any program that is suffering from such an admitted and recognized lack of oversight is not responsible government, whether it is a state park or a charter school" ("Texas Charter School Moratorium Urged," 2000, p. A6).

The Week magazine published a briefing on "The Charter School Alternative" (May 21, 2009). "Lack of oversight can lead to trouble. A charter school in Pennsylvania is under investigation because the school's operator hired family members and routinely made school purchases from companies he owned" (para. 7). Another charter school in Pennsylvania was investigated for high administrative expenses, including millions of dollars paid in rent, management fees, and salaries that went to a for-profit company associated with the school.

In the State of Arizona, which currently has the second-largest number of charter schools in the nation, state senator Lisa Graham Keegan, who became superintendent for public instruction in 1995, has continued strong advocacy for charter schools since that time. According to Bracey (2002), she was criticized by the *Arizona Tribune* for withholding reports critical of charter schools and killing a monitoring program that had been uncovering staggering problems. Bracey quoted David Berliner, then dean of the

Arizona State University of Education, who, when asked where he thought the charter movement was heading, replied, "Bosnia" (Bracey, 2002, p. 84).

In California, the second state to pass a charter school law, evaluations of charter schools specific to the state were undertaken by Eric Rofes of the University of California at Berkeley and by Amy Stuart Wells at the University of California in Los Angeles (2008). Wells developed a list of evaluative criteria for charter schools in which one would expect charters to be superior to public schools. The list included

1. Accountability. Because charter schools are more accountable for student outcomes, charters will work harder to meet their stated goals.
2. Efficiency. Freed from the shackles of bureaucracy, charter schools will be more efficient and will be able to do more with fewer resources.
3. Competition. By creating competition for the other schools in the district, charters will force change in the public schools.
4. Innovation. Charters will create new models of schooling and serve as laboratories of innovation from which public schools can learn and adopt.
5. Choice. Because charter schools are freed from bureaucracy, they will provide parents with a wider range of choices.
6. Autonomy. Because charter schools are freed from bureaucracy, they will be empowered to better serve students and their families (Wells, 2008).

Accountability has multiple definitions, but real accountability has a precursor posing the question, "For what and to whom?" Issues of accountability include achieving measurable goals, fiscal accountability, and fairness and morality.

Charters were expected to represent the desires of community-based groups and of parents and teachers who did not believe the organized structures of the public schools were best for their children. Neither teachers nor parents are usually very strong in writing measurable goals, so student performance against goals, if measured at all, has been largely based on student and parent general satisfaction with what was going on.

In fiscal accountability, Knaak (2013) ranked charters as poor to miserable. With experience as a long-term school superintendent, business administrator, school director, department of education supervisor, and project manager, he was keenly aware of the checks and balances that go into public accounting but recognized that, despite intense oversight, some criminal embezzlement still occurs. Knaak (2003) asserted that state legislatures in this country have given out millions of dollars to charters with few requirements for bookkeeping records; for justifying how the spending related to school purposes; or for the qualifications of the people receiving the money—the purveyors and contractors to the charter.

Efficiency is an area in which there seem to be no studies, juried or otherwise, that document increased efficiency in charter schools. In concept, it was thought that charters would require less operating money. However, a UCLA study showed that they cost more on a per-student basis than public schools (Knaak, 2013, p. 267). To survive, charters rely on raising money from private sources. Those charters that are unable to do so on a consistent basis are typically the worst-performing in terms of student achievement (Knaak, 2013).

Competition from charters has not fazed the public school sector very much, even as many public schools have closed. Charter high schools are almost all academic or pre-academic, and most lack the specialized vocational or prevocational courses, competitive athletics, and modified facilities for special education and handicapped students of the

larger high schools. Charters do have the competitive advantage of trying to improve pupil performance by extending the school day and school year, subject to being able to provide staffing if they are required to have licensed teachers. Such extensions are largely cost prohibitive in public schools because of employee contracts, and neither the states

nor local boards nor teacher unions are willing to absorb those costs. In part, the public schools refuse to compete because of what they see as the multiplicity of *unfair advantages* given to the charters.

Innovation is an area in which there is virtually nothing in the literature to suggest that, given relatively equal footing in student and parent selection and equal learning time, charter schools have found ways to induce more student learning in equal time for less cost. For example, Western Michigan University sponsored a number of studies on charters, some of which were reported by Bracey (2002). Evaluators were struck by the similarity of charters to each other and to regular schools. They found no innovations in curriculum that did not already exist in public schools. Researchers reported parents often had a "not with my kid you don't" attitude toward innovation (Bracey, 2002).

Choice is one charter concept where victory might be claimed—except that poor minority students have trouble getting past the admissions process. Charters did not introduce school choice; it had its start with the forming of magnet schools to encourage racial integration in the schools. The idea broadened with the introduction of vouchers, but they collided with national concepts of separation of church and state. To some degree,

charters have sidestepped the religion issue and have been able to move ahead.

Autonomy for charter schools in general has been achieved, especially as it relates to being freed from elected boards, school administrators, and teacher unions. Most charter boards (where they exist) function as self-sustaining entities. They can remove dissident board members and invite new members at the will of the majority of the board. They can also fire teachers who serve at the pleasure of the board. Of course, this blessing of autonomy has to be viewed relative to the success—or lack thereof—of the other evaluative factors.

Conclusion

The charter school movement has attained an acclaim as educational reform that is not sustained by juried research or evidential experience. Charter schools will likely continue to function in Minnesota and the United States because of influential backers and the will

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